

Effectiveness of Training and Support Services in Serving Fayette County

Foster Homes: A Survey Analysis

Research Project Presentation



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Purpose of Study

- The institution of foster care was designed and intended to be a nurturing, safe, and temporary placement alternative for abused, exploited, dependent, or neglected children who were removed from their home environments due to issues pertaining to child abuse, dependency, or neglect. However, some children may experience or may be exposed to negative environments or situations while within the sanctity of foster care such as experiencing caregiver rejection, multiple placements, placement disruptions, revictimization, and further incidents of child abuse or neglect (NASW, 2003).
- The proposed study assessed for factors relating to the effectiveness of foster care support and training among Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services Department for Community Based Services foster parents residing within Fayette County.
- Such a topic was explored as it appeared that the effectiveness of foster parent support and training was associated with the reduction of negative experiences for children residing within the out of home care placements of foster care.

Description of Problem

- The need for alternative placements for abused, dependent, or neglected children remains in demand as child abuse, dependency, and neglect remains prevalent within American society. The U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect claimed approximately 2.3 million children were reported in 1993 as suspected victims of child abuse and neglect and stated that in 1995 that abuse and neglect in the home was the leading cause of death for children age four and younger (NASW, 2003). The board further contended that approximately 2000 children per year, five every day, die at the hands of parents. Such statistical data assists with the demonstration of need for out of home care placements and permanency for children where reunification measures with the family are not to be ascertained. It was estimated that approximately 500,000 children were residing within out of home care within the United States of America within the year 1996 (NASW, 2003).

Description of Problem (Continued)

- Multiple placements, placement disruptions, and placement instability for children residing within foster care remains a continued and valid concern among child welfare professionals. The majority of children residing within foster care for twelve months or less in the year 2000 experienced two or less placements. However, multiple placements and placement disruptions began to increase for children as the length of time spent residing within care increased (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), 2000). The median length of residence for children within foster care in the state of Kentucky was 15.5 months within the year 2000 (US DHHS, 2000). Thus, it may be presumed that a majority of children in Kentucky foster care placements during the year 2000 experienced either multiple placements, placement disruptions, or placement instability as they resided within care for a time period greater than twelve months.

Description of Problem (Continued)

- In the year 2000 a total of 10,243 children were placed within foster care for some duration of time (US DHHS, 2000). In the year 2003 there were approximately 6,300 children residing within the foster care system of Kentucky (Cabinet for Health and Family Services (CHFS), 2004). It is necessary that the effectiveness of the institution of foster care be continually assessed and examined for improvement with such high numbers of children entering with the foster care system for any duration of time. Further, it is equally necessary that foster home placements be nurturing and safe placement environments for children whom frequently enter foster care with traumatic backgrounds and an array of difficulties.



Study Questions/Hypothesis

- A review of existing literature demonstrated that perceived support, effectiveness of training, and lack of information have been found to be related to foster parent decisions to continue fostering or to discontinue fostering and as such this study focused upon identified issues. This study examined, through the utilization of survey methodology, Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services Department for Community Based Services foster parents residing within Fayette County, and assessed for what factors may be related to the perception of foster parents' levels of support and perceived effectiveness of training received. Further, this study attempted to answer such questions as whether or not Department for Community Based Services' foster parents receive sufficient training and support services from the Cabinet for Health and Family Services, what these foster parents see as their needs in continuing to foster, and how these foster parents rate services they have received.



Interest to Social Work

- Social Workers are concerned with social justice and believe that all individuals, children within this study, are deserving of safe and nurturing environments that promote that individual's well-being
- Social Workers champion to reduce and prevent abuse and neglect of all individuals through advocating, mentoring, educating, and working with individuals on a micro, mezzo, and macro level
- Furthering education through training empowers clientele, foster parents within this study, and assists within the pursuit of social justice
- Furthering education assists with the acquisition of individual and community self-sufficiency
- Nurturing and protecting children within out of home care helps break family cycles and assists in developing healthy productive children

Methodology

- The present study utilized a survey methodology. All active foster homes Certified and Licensed through the Cabinet for Health and Family Services Department for Community Based Services and located within Lexington, Kentucky (Fayette County) were included within the survey. The study included a total of one hundred and seventy six foster homes.
- A survey was mailed to each active foster parent or parents residing within the home. A cover letter was mailed with the survey to explain the purpose of the study and to serve as an endorsement of the study from the Fayette County Cabinet for Health and Family Services Department for Community Based Services. The cover letter included the signature of Toya Nicholson, the Service Region Administrator of the Fayette County Cabinet for Health and Family Services Department for Community Based Services, thus demonstrating the endorsement of the study. Toya Nicholson endorsed the study and gave consent to utilize existing information of the foster parents in Fayette County.

Methodology (Continued)

- The survey was anonymous. Participants were informed that participation within the study was voluntary and were ensured that participation or declining to participate within the study would have no negative or positive impact on their status within the agency. Participants, further, were provided with confidentiality as no personal or identifying information was connected or tied to their returned survey in any way. Final surveys are to be shared with the Cabinet for Health and Family Services solely and shall not include any identifying information, thus, providing for confidentiality. Participants acknowledged informed consent of the study upon completion and return of the study.

Implementation

- Survey questions were closed ended so to be able to clearly assess response patterns among participants for comparison. A database was established through the utilization of a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) with each variable being numerically coded and recorded so to track each variable. Scores for each variable were entered into the SPSS system and analyzed. Some open ended questions were included within the study to explore issues or characteristics that may not have been included as questions within the study. The responses to the open ended questions are to be shared with the Fayette County Cabinet for Health and Family Services and discussed with regards to future implications for research. The results of the study are to be shared with the University of Kentucky College of Social Work and the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services.

Results

- Fifty-six surveys were returned out of the initial one hundred an seventy-six surveys mailed out to all Licensed and Certified Fayette County Department for Community Based Services. The majority of respondents to the survey were female (92.9%), between the ages of thirty-seven and forty-four years of age (39.3%), married (53%), and Caucasian (66.1%). The majority of respondents had fostered children through the Department for Community Based Services for less than five years (60.7%) and fostered children through either public or private organizations for less than five years (57.1%). The majority of respondents had fostered five children or less historically, including children that they would later adopt, throughout their fostering career (55.4%). The average amount of time a foster child had remain in the home for the majority of respondents was between six and twelve months (33.9%).
- In all respondents felt supported by the Department for Community Based Services. A majority of respondents felt supported by the Department for Community Based Services (41.1%). A majority of the respondents feel very supported by their Recruitment and Certification workers (48.2%). A majority of respondents felt supported by the foster child's worker (41.1%).

Results (Continued)

- In regards to training, the majority of respondents felt that the preparation training they received was effective (41.%). Most respondents that participated within the additional targeted trainings upon the survey felt that the trainings were either effective or somewhat effective. However, most respondents had not participated within the identified trainings that targeted children who mostly disrupt from out of home placements such as adolescents (51.8%), children with diagnosed special needs (35.7%), medically fragile children (60.7%), and children of differing racial or ethnic backgrounds from their foster parent (33.9%).
- In regards to utilization of support systems, it would appear that most Fayette County foster parents fail to utilize existing support systems. The majority of respondents stated that they never utilize respite services (57.1%), that they never utilize the mentor program (66.1%), that those able to serve as mentors do not (85.7%), that they never attend Kentucky Foster/Adoptive Association meetings (48.2%), or utilize the Kentucky Foster and Adoptive Parent Training Support Network (50.0%).

Results (continued)

- Years of fostering experience, fostering for less than five years versus fostering for more than five years, were compared for statistical differences. Statistical Differences that were significant, significant at $p < .05$, were in relation to responses regarding feeling supported by the Department for Community Based Services, the use of respite services, the use of mentoring services, and the use of the Kentucky Foster/Adoptive Association. Those respondents who had fostered for five years and more felt more supported by the agency and utilized the above mentioned support systems more frequently than those respondents who fostered for five years or less.
- When comparing race, several statistical differences that were significant were found between African American and Caucasian respondents. African American respondents felt more supported by the Department for Community Based Services and utilized the Kentucky Foster/Adoptive Association more frequently than Caucasian respondents. Also, African American participants found training related to physical abuse of children, drug dependent infants, and forming relationships with birth parents training more effective overall.

Results (continued)

- When comparing marital status, several statistical differences that were significant were found. Married respondents found training related to drug dependent infants, children with special needs, medically fragile children, and children with diagnosed behavioral and mental disorders more effective. Unmarried respondents utilized respite services more often than married respondents.
- Most foster parents over the age of forty four (69.6%) were not married with the majority of respondents age thirty seven to forty four married (77.3%). Surprisingly, a large number of respondents age thirty six and younger were not married (45.5%). Further, most African American respondents were over the age of forty four (58.8%) compared to Caucasian respondents (32.4%).

Results (Continued)

- When examining open ended question responses a pattern of needs and concerns emerged. The majority of respondents felt that a respite provider list was needed to be compiled and mailed to all active foster parents. A majority of respondents believed that information regarding agency policy and procedures needed to be provided to all active foster parents and explained within an annual training. A need for more training related to drug exposed children, adolescents, and children with behavioral/mental health/attachment needs was expressed. More support from the child's worker and less worker turnover were expressed concerns. More financial reimbursement and assistance in obtaining child care were also noted concerns.

Strengths

- I am conducting my graduate practicum with the Basic and the Care Plus Foster Care Teams of Fayette County whom are supportive, as is the entire regional staff, of the purposed study.
- Through my practicum experience and employment with the Cabinet for Health and Family Services I have developed a relationship with several active Department for Community Based Services' foster parents and believe this shall increase survey participation.
- The survey focused upon the perceptions of active foster parents and sought to enhance and enrich their fostering experience with the Department for Community Based Services. The survey focused upon their needs.
- Supportive services informational pamphlets were mailed with the survey, so to increase supportive services awareness and encourage utilization of such services with regards to Fayette County foster parents.

Concerns and Limitations

- One such limitation that existed, was the time-limitedness of the study as it was completed in one college semester - - approximately five months.
- Another limitation was that resources that were available to Fayette County only were examined due to proximity. Surveying foster parents from many differing counties may have increased the generalizability of the study.
- The study lacked information from foster children placed in Fayette County foster homes, information from the child's social worker, and information from the foster parent's social worker regarding a foster parents' level of training. Such data was not collected as the present study attempted to focus upon the perceptions of Fayette County foster parents whether than the perceptions of others, yet research in that area may be needed in future study so to form a more complete understanding of foster care as a system.

Conclusion

- The study attempted to serve the best interest of children placed within out of home care as it attempted to identify strengths and weaknesses of the foster care system and as it attempted to identify services needed to retain safe, nurturing, and protective foster parents.
- The study attempted to identify needs and service gaps within the training and supportive services provided to Fayette County foster care parents. Fayette County foster parents were given the opportunity to state their needs and wants through open ended questions upon the survey anonymously.
- Areas of improvement were identified, so that improvements may be implemented in retaining foster parents and for use with future foster parents.

References

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- U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2000). Child Welfare Outcomes: Annual Report. Retrieved from the World Wide Web on September 27, 2004: www.acf.hhs.gov.

Questions/Comments

